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Is CIA back in business of 'destabilizing' regimes?

"No comment, no comment, and a big fat no comment."

That was the comment of the United States ambassador to Honduras, John D. Negroponi, when asked about United States recruitment of Nicaraguan exiles for supposedly clandestine operations against the Marxist-oriented Sandinista regime.

"No comment."

That was President Reagan's response several months ago to a question as to whether in general he favored American covert action aimed at "destabilizing" foreign governments.

What's the United States government up to in Nicaragua? Is the CIA back in the business of "destabilizing" regimes Washington doesn't like? Newsweek magazine, following up a report nearly 18 months ago by the New Republic, reports that Ambassador Negroponi is overseeing "an ambitious covert campaign" of arming, training and directing Nicaraguan exiles to "harass and undermine" the Nicaraguan government installed in 1979 by a revolution that toppled the dictatorship of Gen. Anastasio Somoza.

A team of 50 CIA operatives is serving in Honduras, supplemented by dozens of other operatives and Argentine military advisors, the magazine reports. "This is the big fiasco of this administration," it quotes one U.S. official as saying. "This is our Bay of Pigs."

That celebrated episode, conceived under the Eisenhower administration and carried out under the Kennedy administration, was not simply an ill-conceived expedition and an embarrassing failure. It also produced pre-

cisely the opposite results of those intended, solidifying Cuban support of Fidel Castro.

Possibly, very likely, Mr. Castro would have turned out anyway to be what he became, a puppet of the Soviet Union. Nor can anyone reasonably expect that the Sandinistas, who have made no secret of their friendship to Havana and Moscow, are about to become admirers of the *Yanqui imperalismo* for which they have professed such hostility.

Still, there are democratic forces in Nicaragua, people disillusioned by the replacement of one dictatorship by another and by the regime's inability to cope with an economic crisis its policies have helped engender. Why, as a practical matter, should the United States set itself up as a convenient scapegoat for the Sandinistas' failure? Why, by "covert" meddling in Nicaraguan affairs, help the regime rally the people to its cause? How, in the circumstances, can Washington expect any credibility when it charges the Nicaraguans with meddling in the affairs of El Salvador by supplying the insurgents there with arms? Or, for that matter, expect to be taken seriously when it denounces Soviet pressure on Poland?

In any case, the days when administrations could say, in effect, ask us no questions and we will tell you lies, are over. The Reagan administration cannot take refuge behind "no comment." The Congress and the American people are entitled to know what the policy is toward Nicaragua, how it is being carried out, and why.